

## Service: Obedience of Noah

Genesis 6: 9-22  
October 25, 2009

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*Genesis 6:9-22*

*Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.*

*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.*

*For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die. But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.*

*And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive. Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them." Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

One of the most lovely themes for nursery decorations is that of Noah's ark – and so we've just joined the ranks by painting one in our nursery, too. At my urging, I confess! Now our infants and toddlers can gaze up at walls with the cheery images—one of many out there--of a friendly, bearded man and his family surrounded by pairs of charming little animals, all cute, all harmless, riding along on what looks like warm, cozy boat. And we've got the dove with the olive branch flying in from an adjoining wall, you'll note. Some of you may also know that this fall our children's Sunday School began with a 5-week unit on Noah: we emphasized that the rainbow after the flood reminds us of God's promise to never again destroy the earth and its living creatures on the earth.

Yet I must admit that I sometimes wonder why we tell children that story as if it's "cute." I'd think they must find it at least a little frightening, for God was set to destroy all those



disobedient people – everyone except Noah and his family. And all the living creatures, as well! A child may want to hide under the covers, knowing their own disobedience.

Today's passage is just a glimpse of the familiar story in Genesis about the Great Flood that washed away all life on the earth except for this one "good" man and his family. And what we've read is only the beginning, only part of the larger story, which goes on for several chapters in Genesis. The point of the story, at least at its beginning when the stage is set, has to include the wickedness rampant in the world ten generations into the family saga of humankind. Noah is alive just ten generations after Adam, and there will be ten more generations before Abraham. Noah is, in fact, a kind of "new Adam."

After the account of creation of Adam in Genesis, it seems that things had gone downhill rather quickly. It began with sin in the Garden of Eden and the murder of brother by brother, and now the whole world is evil, violent, and corrupt. Writer Barbara Brown Taylor observes, "Cain killed his brother Abel – the first murder but not the last – and humankind went on breaking what God had made until, by the sixth chapter of Genesis, God ran out of pity..." (Taylor, "Refreshing God's Memory," *Gospel Medicine*, Boston, Cowley Publications, 1995, p. 30). It is a pretty quick ride from 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good' in the first chapter of Genesis, to the sixth chapter of Genesis, with God saying, 'I am sorry that I have made them.' Just five short chapters to this catastrophic event.

And yet within the catastrophe are mercy and hope. The short version of the Great Flood story that we share today is perhaps frightening, as any story about sin and judgment should be, but it is also full of God's grace and compassion. Yes, things were bad, but God's mind is on saving humanity in spite of itself. Our Bible speaks of the hope contained within little things (mustard seeds and leaven) and people small in the eyes of the world (David

as a young boy, Zacchaeus, the children coming to Jesus). Today's story reminds us that we all come from a broken, small but precious remnant of humanity, and Noah becomes the first remnant.

Violence and sin almost influenced God the Creator to end it all. The flood was not the act of a capricious or cruel God; God feels compassion even amidst his utter despair about his broken and disobedient creation -- especially the human part. (Kate Huey, Reflection – Waters of New Life, in “Weekly Seeds,” iucc online).

So God chose to save Noah, who seems to be the one man left standing who is “good,” who does not follow the ways of selfishness and wickedness. The text simply notes “*he walked with God.*” (v. 9).

When God spoke with Noah, apparently Noah did not show disbelief, nor fear, nor –like Moses--apologize that he wasn't up to the task. We hear nothing of Noah's verbal response; we just know he obeyed, no matter how crazed his building an enormous boat might have seemed at the time. It would take about 100 years to build this huge ark – the size of two football fields -- and then expect two of every living creature to board with him. The text tells us after God explains this amazing task: “*Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him*” (v. 22). And later in chapter 7, when God directs him to board the ark with the animals to prepare for the coming rain, it again says, “*And Noah did all that the Lord had commanded him*” (7:5). Such obedience Noah showed in not questioning it, but just doing it! “*Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way; thou art the potter, I am the clay.*”

Noah had been over 500 years old when he began, and 600 years old when the rains and floods came. And he would not get out of the ark until the 601<sup>st</sup> year (see 8:13). So this Noah was not only obedient to God, patient

and trusting, but if you can imagine the voyage on the water taking care of all those animals, Noah was amazingly long-suffering, as well!

So, we wonder, how can we relate to Noah? There's little character development, just a man who continuously "walked with God." Noah trusted God, he obeyed God, and Noah followed through in what God instructed him to do. That was the model for faith, for he was the one single person judged worthy of salvation.

But you and I? We know we're not worthy! We mess up! We may start to follow, but we get sidetracked! We will always fail to meet the righteous standards met by this biblical Noah, truly a hero figure. The Apostle Paul well knew our sin. He writes in Romans, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). Yet the rainbow promise is that God has not and will not abandon us. And so God sent the Messiah, a Savior, Jesus Christ. God's character is one of compassion: Isaiah 43:1-2 recalls God's carrying us through the waters, as well: "*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.*"

When life seems to overwhelm us, God will yet carry us. Despite our failures, God in Christ has made a way for our righteousness. In Christ, we walk by faith and not by works. So, folks, metaphorically speaking, we're on the ark, too, saved from destruction. To be honest, we each will fail to walk completely "with" God: we will fall down over and over; but then we can confess our waywardness and get up, wipe our hands, and start walking again. As we do so, we heed God's call to obedience and we look to Jesus, the founder and finisher of our faith. Through it all, we can trust that God's hand is upon us, guiding us, helping to gather up the broken pieces, binding

up the brokenhearted and restoring life and hope. So God is ever at work to restore and reshape our lives--with love, with compassion and with healing. Amen.

An interesting note for readers, taken from Kate Huey (above):

So we might focus in this Flood story on the breadth of God's covenant and care: God obviously cares a lot not only about us but about the animals, too. We often forget that the creatures of the earth are included in the covenant of God's care. If we actually understood things that way, wouldn't we hasten to repair the damage we've done? If God went to so much trouble and so much detail to instruct Noah about the importance of taking every kind of animal with him (notice how many times the words "every" and "all" appear even in this short passage), and if God, at the very end of this story (9:15) makes a covenant with Noah and with "every living creature that is with you," perhaps we should sit up and take notice. Caring about creation, about global warming, about pollution, about animal neglect and cruelty, aren't just nice little hobbies to make us feel good about ourselves. They aren't only about our own safety and survival, either. Such care and commitment are at the heart of faithfulness to a covenant made long ago that, thankfully, includes "every" one of us, "all" of God's precious children (even though, alas, we still sin, too, yet God is merciful).